

Nickel, artifacts helping explain Custer's death

By Roger Boye

A nickel dated 1870 and other relics are helping experts dissect the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Indians killed Lt. Col. George A. Custer and nearly 215 of his soldiers.

The tiny coin was unearthed eight months ago during a major archeological survey of the Custer battlefield in southeastern Montana. Discovery of the nickel and nearly 1,900 other artifacts indicate, among other things, that the so-called "Last Stand Hill" was indeed the site of fierce combat, said dig director Douglas D. Scott.

Details of the June 25, 1876, battle have been shrouded in mystery because no white man survived the fighting and because Indian accounts of the event were inconsistent. For example, historians don't know precisely where Custer and his men died or the location of Indian battle positions near the Little Bighorn River.

The excavation turned up scores of arrowheads and cartridge cases, leading Scott to surmise that the Indians used two main lines of attack. Also, the Indians may have had a substantial number of firearms, many more than some historians had thought.

Scott's crew found the nickel buried an inch deep near a bullet and lead shot on "Last Stand Hill" [also called "Custer Hill"]. Scott concedes that someone could have dropped the coin there years after the battle, but he says the location of the find [within an area fenced-off from tourists] suggests that the nickel may have been lost by a soldier during the fighting.

The coin shows little "circulation wear" despite heavy corrosion on the heads side, further evidence that it probably "witnessed" the battle. Diggers using metal detectors also located three modern-era Lincoln cents along the trails leading to battlefield markers; those coins likely were lost by visitors, Scott said.

Other significant finds include a cavalry boot, buttons, pieces of spurs and saddles, and even a wedding band. This winter, experts are evaluating the artifacts at National Park Service offices in Lincoln, Neb., where Scott works as a supervisory archeologist.

A report on the excavation is due by early spring. Eventually, all the items will be returned to the battlefield for storage and possible display in a government museum on the grounds.

Next May and June, Scott will return to Montana with a small army of volunteers for more digging. Among other things, they want to survey a deep ravine just south of "Last Stand Hill," where, legend has it, 28 of Custer's troops died.